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Cotton Since the Days of Calico

An interview between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. Wallace Kadderly, Office of Information, broadcast Friday, May 19, 1939, in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home program, by the National Broadcasting Company and a network of 104 associate radio stations.

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WALLACE KADDERLY:

Here we are in Washington on another of these beautiful May days, when Washington is looking its very best. And here again---ready to do their very best--are two of your Department of Agriculture reporters---Ruth Van Deman and E. J. Rowell.

Ruth, I believe this is the day you're going to bring us up to date on cotton fabrics---cotton since the days of calico---isn't that quite a jump for you?

RUTH VAN DEMAN:

I didn't exactly plan to put on "the old gray bonnet, with the blue ribbons on it"---

KADDERLY:

"And hitch old Dobbin to the shay"--- No, I'm afraid you wouldn't even know how to back the horse up to the shafts of the buggy. You're too young -

VAN DEMAN:

Don't be too sure. I certainly know how it feels to wear calico---how it was when you started for school on a fine spring morning, in a stiff-starched calico dress, ironed so smooth you didn't want to sit down and wrinkle it. Or sometimes it was an old percale with a bright streak around the bottom where the hem had been let down. That gave away how much the dress had faded and shrunk in the wash---and made you feel very self-conscious.

I couldn't help thinking about that this morning, when I was down in our textile laboratories. Clarice Scott and Margaret Smith were working away on a model outfit for the 4-H Club girl of 1939.

Every cotton they were using was colorfast---so marked on the bolt. All of them had been preshrunk by the manufacturer. And several of the fabrics were marked crease-resistant or wrinkle-resistant.

It's been quite a problem to get the shrinkage of cotton fabrics under control. And it isn't working 100 percent yet. But at least we've come a long way since the days of calico.

If you want to be up to date when you buy cotton goods this year, be on the lookout for labels that say "will not shrink more than so-and-so many percent." You can trust a label like that. You can't always trust one saying "shrink-proof" or some phrase that's too general to show exactly what it means.

(over)

VAN DEMAN: (Cont'd)

And I might add, the terms about wrinkle resistant are still a bit vague, not altogether satisfactory. So it's well to crumple up a piece of the goods in your hand before you ask the sales girl to cut it from the bolt. Or if it's a ready made dress sit down in it a time or two before you make your decision.

Going back to the evening dresses for just a minute. Mrs. Roosevelt said the other day at her Press Conference she expects to wear a cotton dress at the White House on May 31, when she and the President give their annual party for the newspaper men and women. This is not setting a new style. Many First Ladies have worn cotton in the White House. On a warm summer evening here in Washington, cotton is about the coolest, most comfortable thing you can wear. I'm wondering whether Mrs. Roosevelt's dress will have a full flounced skirt and the neck finished with beading and Valenciennes lace, like the one Clarice Scott is designing for the 4-H Club girl.

Mrs. Roosevelt didn't tell us what color her dress is to be either. But whatever it is, I'm quite sure the dye will be of the best. The dye chemists kept at it until they got the trick of making color stick permanently on cotton fibers. The modern vat dyes, or indanthrene dyes as they're often called, are fast to just about everything---soap and water, perspiration, and sunlight. And you can have them in the softest pastels, just as well as in the old-fashioned turkey red and indigo blue. Just look for the mark "vat dyed" or "indanthrene" color.

But if you see a fabric just marked "colorfast" or "will not fade", better keep your fingers crossed. Those are loose terms. The color of a cotton fabric generally has to take all kinds of punishment. So you need to know exactly what it's fast to. If the right kind of dye is properly applied, the color should last as long as the fabric.

And in passing, let me drop a note of discouragement to anyone who thinks of dipping a piece of cotton in salt water or an alum bath, to "set" the color. If there were any such cheap and easy way of setting the color, the manufacturer would have taken it before the cloth left his plant. Salt and alum are used as mordants in dyeing cloth at home. But as an after-treatment on commercially dyed cloth, they're useless.

KADDERLY:

Better to save the salt to put in the mashed potatoes?

VAN DEMAN:

Much better.

KADDERLY:

Well, this has been very interesting---hearing about the improvements in cotton fabrics, since the days of calico. As these new things come along one by one, we accept them. And we don't realize what tremendous strides have been made until we have them pointed out as you've done today, Ruth.

Come back again soon and give us another chapter. And now, which of your home economics bulletins are you suggesting to those who'd like more on cotton fabrics?

VAN DEMAN:

We have several. There's the one of course with the buying guides for sheets and bath towels. And there's one on "Selection of Cotton Fabrics." It tells a lot about weaves---and the way the design's put into the cloth---things I haven't even touched on here. And of course the window curtain bulletin has a lot about that type of cotton fabrics.

KADDERLY:

Well, Farm and Home friends, that's three bulletins with helpful information on choosing cotton fabrics---three bulletins available from the Bureau of Home Economics of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, here in Washington, D. C. They're all free. Just write to the Bureau of Home Economics in Washington, and ask for the free bulletins on cotton fabrics.

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